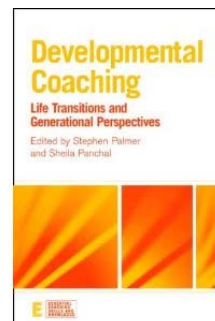


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Book Review

Developmental Coaching: Life Transitions and General Perspectives by Stephen Palmer and Sheila Panchal
(2009), London: Routledge.



This latest addition to the Essential Coaching Skills and Knowledge series draws on several expert contributors to examine theories of human transition and generational contrasts, taking a unique look at how, with the aid of coaching, we can successfully navigate the hazards of progression through the life cycle from childhood to retirement.

The book is in two parts; the opening establishes a framework for life's transitional phases and provides informed commentary on the impact of change. This is followed by an exploration of generational issues and strategies for managing transition within the workplace, with particular attention to redundancy, using techniques such as positive psychology.

Part 1 begins chronologically with the ever changing childhood stage and the role played by schools. It reviews the experiences of external coaches in collaboration with children's customary coaching providers; parent and teacher. Under the banner of the 'celebrating strengths' programme it highlights the use of storytelling and community celebrations, applying psychodynamic theory to deal with transition anxieties experienced not only by pupils but by their teachers and the institution as a whole.

It next addresses arguably the most formidable of transitions in the teenage years, with coaching skills and self help techniques directed at the formation of identity and coping with growing pains, self consciousness and peer pressure. The chapter also examines how new technology has shaped the attitudes and behaviour of this group.

Stepping further along the timeline to the generation Y category of early adulthood the book explores first the shift from the academic to the working world and then the more contentious 'quarter-life crisis' before arriving at turning thirty. Solution-focused coaching is employed to promote self-awareness and explore expectations as well as the use of positive psychology and escape strategies. However, in reviewing relationships and attitudes to life and work in the 20-30 age group it appears to have glossed over any references to the stresses and responsibilities of leaving the family home for an independent life.

Moving from early adulthood to modern midlife, *Developmental Coaching* delves into areas of Jungian theory on individuation and the influences of this stage on working life, relationships, lifestyle and health. It uses mindfulness, acceptance and being in the moment to illustrate coaching approaches that aid meaning, purpose and self acceptance.

Sandwiched between these developmental stages is a section on becoming a parent which, while consisting of diverse models and being principally a transition of choice, ranks highly amongst life's key events. In dealing with parental pressures, both pre and post natal, offers practical approaches and techniques including the use of positive psychology and cognitive behaviour therapy in combating issues of confidence and rebuilding self esteem. It also raises the issue of supervision as a safety net for possible depression in this potentially delicate transition.

The final life stage deals with issues arising in the approach to and the consequence of retirement, addressing theoretical considerations and generational factors, and life areas such as relationships, finances, health and lifestyle. This is a diverse stage for coaches, requiring a flexible approach to coachees' needs and motivation to achieve retirement goals.

These intuitive observations on confronting the obstacles to progression through each step of the life cycle and the illustrations of how coaching comes into play are supported by specific case studies, tailored to clarify and explain the theory, and by framed discussion of issues to stimulate debate and promote understanding. Each chapter would be worthy of a complete book in its own right but the synoptic format has not diminished the value of each contribution and chapter are further reinforced by an exhaustive academic bibliography together with a list of internet resources enabling the reader to penetrate to far deeper levels of insight and analysis.

The second part of the book reviews specific themes and applications of developmental coaching including a chapter on positive psychology and strengths coaching through transition which embodies more tangible approaches to navigating transitions at work, such as redundancy. The focus of the methodology does, however, slant towards models adopted by CAPP, an organisation led by one of the contributors. The chapter on managing generations reviews the differences in attitudes, values and behaviours of the four distinct generational categories, from veterans and baby boomers to generations X and Y, highlighting the need for managers to adjust their approach to engaging and motivating the different generations. These insights are particularly useful for addressing performance management issues and the provision of inspired leadership in uncertain economic times. Comprehending social and cultural influences of the various generations will undoubtedly enhance communication and influencing skills.

All these individual contributions to the book are topped and tailed by an introduction and final reflections by the book's two editors, pulling together the various modules, outlining the themes of lifespan development and the issues they project. The opening explores what it calls "the emerging field of developmental coaching" and the epilogue provides comment and overview of its core components.

It is within these sections that the editors acknowledge the book's limitations. The condensed approach to a subject as complex as human development has inevitably diluted explanations of the fundamentals necessary to fully grasp the implications. The speed of change within our society also means that some of the generational perspectives will date, creating a snapshot in current time as a consequence. The problems associated with defining development are recognised because, not being an empirical term, its paths are inevitably varied. The book is also at pains to emphasise the importance of being mindful of individual as well as socio-economic differences and avoiding stereotypes and labelling.

Despite these imperfections the principles embody sufficient constants to allow the bigger picture to prevail and by avoiding sweeping generalisations and the pitfalls of a one-size-fits-all approach the book tenders a valid contribution to our understanding of the physical, psychological and socio-cultural challenges that confront us in the passage from cradle to grave.

The complexities of assimilating contrasting approaches and coaching interventions, several different life stages and a variety of contributors has inevitably led to some incongruity in the blending of styles and repetition of some elements of developmental coaching such as the ‘who am I’, ‘where am I going’ concept to the whole lifecycle. This by no means detracts from the overall impact of the final product and the patchwork quilt effect offers a comforting, straightforward and informative read that works at several levels.

Many coaches operate within specified boundaries and the book establishes a useful aide-memoir to any unfamiliar facets of coaching. As a training tool it represents an excellent study aid, broadly covering the gamut of life transitions and includes a vast array of references. Its work on the key attributes, styles and behaviours of the four generations that compose the workforce dispenses a useful perception to HR people, leaders or anyone involved or interested in people management. From encouraging mindfulness in mid-lifers to recognising and managing generation Y’s high career expectations, the book provides useful tips and techniques. It is an encyclopaedia of generational understanding that would profit anyone working with people; from teachers of the young to carers of the elderly.

The chapter on positive psychology and strengths coaching opens with a quote from Heraclitus that change is the only constant but in acknowledging this we should recognise that this is routinely negotiated by the majority unassisted. Transition may be the passage from one stage to another but the diversity within and between them can make the process either; transitory or prolonged, blurred or subtle. While future uncertainties may create stress the effect is not always negative. The book employs the analogy of the trolls hiding under the bridge in the Billy Goat Gruff fairy tale to illustrate the uncertain obstacles to transition. However, many crave the excitement of taking on the trolls by living on the edge or challenging their limits.

Without disregarding natural capacity to adjust and regain former happiness, the chapter addresses negative aspects of stress and anxiety, reflecting on risks, commitment, motivation and perseverance and how the power of fear can impede change or obstruct opportunities from being grasped. It applies a positive psychology remedial approach focussing on life evaluation, strengths identification and pathways mapping under the banner of a coaching life strategy.

This contribution contains much to ruminate on in respect of the theories, diagnostics and strategic interventions, it acknowledges the vital importance of the coach’s personal strengths, skills and experience in both delivery and outcomes and for this reason the chapter does not sit comfortably with the rest of the book. It takes the subject to another level raising issues of identity, learning and unlearning which can be damaging if misdirected. The boundaries between coaching, counselling and psychotherapy together with adequate supervision are particularly poignant. If the book as a whole is an introduction to key areas, it should perhaps come with a stronger health warning.

The editors claim that all change involves loss, letting go, ambiguity and new beginnings and that making the readjustments can prove challenging. Most people, without access to coaching, must necessarily negotiate these changes alone, or with the support of family and friends, and in so doing comply with Jung's process of Individuation. People do, nevertheless, develop differently to each other and in a manner unrelated to age or experience. In this context generational groups are not always pertinent as some achieve age experiencing little while others accumulate much experience at an early stage.

If then, key life events occur more randomly, recognising the transition process is a vital requirement in understanding and developing a coping strategy. The various chapters of this book provide the template for that recognition and the means to deal with it.

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